

## Book Reviews

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Brian T. May. *Extravagant Postcolonialism: Modernism and Modernity in Anglophone Fiction 1958–1988*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2014. Pp. 246. \$62.50 CAD.

Saikat Majumdar. *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire*. New York: Columbia UP, 2013. Pp. 232. \$80.00 CAD.

The interest in global and postcolonial literatures from the modernist period demonstrates an affinity between the two literary movements, particularly in their willingness to experiment with narration in order to reshape traditional modes of writing. Recent books by Brian T. May and Saikat Majumdar investigate the intersection of postcolonial literatures and modernism through readings that suggest these works extend modernism's aesthetic expression in order to radicalize literary and sociopolitical structures. By asking how global and postcolonial texts espouse and transform modernist tropes, the books address the larger political significance of modernism's revolutionary writing methods in texts that explore the postcolonial experience. May's text specifically considers the concept of rich individuality in global writings via a selection of skillful close readings that uncover strange, unconventional, and extravagant male characters who act as expressions of purposeful creative forces rather than conforming to typical social and cultural practices. Shifting away from aspects of characterization and individuality, Majumdar focuses on the transnational experience of living in the colonial margins that reconfigures banality and boredom as valuable. According to these critical analyses, postcolonial writing's introspection and an interest in experimenting with literary banality and boredom combine to address a postcolonial desire to revitalize the modernist aesthetic as a means of destabilizing the tensions of uneven relationships and crisis in colonial spaces.

May builds on Satya Mohanty's work, which dispels the widely held myth that non-Western literatures do not "value the notion of healthy individuality" (May 1), and seeks to unsettle the canon of "high postcolonialism" (4). *Extravagant Postcolonialism: Modernism and Modernity in Anglophone Fiction 1958–1988* rethinks the influence of modernist authors such as T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett on a selection of postcolonial authors who portray "a particular corner of postcolonial masculinity" (2). May's rich close readings of Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Jean Rhys, Nadine Gordimer, and J. M. Coetzee trace the figure of the mimic man to

his moment of Joycean epiphany. May focuses on eccentric and fragile male characters whom he terms “extravagant” and exposes postcolonialism’s continuation of epiphanic moments—the “signature motif of modernism”—as an aesthetic confrontation that renders individuality with postcolonial consciousness (182). His extensive introduction provides a critical investigation into the convergence of postcolonialism and modernism. Moreover, in order to provide a balanced assessment of this motif, May interrogates not only his own investigation of the extravagant postcolonial individual but also the ethical and affective implications of the individual in theoretical works by Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, and Immanuel Kant. In attempting to dismantle the communal perspective of particular global literatures, *Extravagant Postcolonialism* acknowledges the aesthetic trace of modernity and humanistic values that move beyond articulating an abstract idealization of extravagant individualism. His study convincingly analyzes the phenomenon as a substantive social structure embedded within a particular postcolonial consciousness.

Majumdar’s *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* also considers the link between high modernism and Anglophone postcolonial literature. His analysis explores the conditions of literary banality antithetically, reading the boringness of texts as a subversive challenge to traditional concepts of literature as entertainment. Rather than reading the banal as an “aesthetic failure,” Majumdar’s investigation reconfigures mundane moments as a radical motif that “aestheticize[s] the relation between the imperial metropolis and the colonial periphery” in a way that creates a narrative energy that revitalizes modernity (4). He situates his argument in relation to his insightful political understanding of Virginia Woolf’s essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” and discusses modernism’s disposition for replicating the banal, without giving into the spectacular or transcendent. This, Majumdar argues, is particularly true of postcolonial authors, who radicalize banality and boredom by making it into an “affirmative narrative force” that decolonizes “the development of the postcolonial individual” (15, 16). He chooses itinerant authors from “different corners of the world” (27) who have “historically constituted the global British Empire” via a perspective of “colonial modernity” (27). Deftly addressing the failed epiphanies of Joyce’s characters who are unable to transcend banal spaces, Katherine Mansfield’s delicate construction of “boredom bred” through Maori-settler relations, as well as Zoë Wicomb’s and Amit Chaudhuri’s experiments with the tensions between racial and colonial power through energized reimaginings of traditional postcolonial voices, Majumdar decisively traces his argument through literary, historical, and archeological paradigms. *Prose of the World* exposes the “non-cathartic motif[s]” of boredom present in these texts through the revolution-

## Book Reviews

ary poetics constructed by high modernism, which provide aesthetic pleasure rather than signify aesthetic lack (6).

May's and Majumdar's critical analyses consider alternative readings of canonical postcolonial texts that create new discussions and broaden the boundaries of global literature beyond traditional considerations of political and cultural structures of (de)colonization in order to consider the creative potential of modernism's influence on postcolonial authors. This seems particularly true of May's work, which does not rely on a specific geographical or political consideration for its arguments but considers works of post-independence Anglophone literature and allows for the possibility of further global investigations within the span of 1958–88. *Extravagant Postcolonialism* and *Prose of the World's* conscientious revitalization of canonical global literatures exhibits how a modernist approach challenges the conventions of postcolonial literature by addressing the subtle ways in which authors push the boundaries of colonial experience and spaces. Works such as these reenergize and alter our engagement with global literature by providing readings that collapse traditional narratives and reveal the need for further investigation into postcolonialism's revitalization of the modernist desire to destabilize sociopolitical structures through unconventional modes of writing.

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